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Special Section: Lantern Essay Competition Winners

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Broilers

By Lisa Kemmerer

“They’re free with a purchase!” My sister beamed down at the fluffy yellow chicks scampering along the bottom of a smelly box. Her unselfconscious smile made the lines across her hazelnut skin disappear.

“You’re supporting the hen industry,” I repeated with less conviction.

“I know,” my sister said with a shift to sadness. Her wavy brown hair stuck up in odd places, unruly and unnoticed. “But if we take these two we can protect them. We can’t change the industry, we can’t save them all, but we can offer these two little ones a full and happy life!”

It was a familiar argument. It had been the same with each of the 20 indoor cats, seven dogs, three horses, 12 chickens, seven ducks, and two geese that were settled on our muddy plot of wooded land.

I glanced up to discover my sister holding two squirming, peeping chicks. I opened my mouth to speak, but remained silent. It was a done deal. Once she had them in hand, she had them in heart, and commonsense resistance shifted toward unkind. She was my sister, my closest kin, my oldest friend—I knew her. While I was daydreaming, she had selected the weakest links, two little problem birds for us to labor and worry over until their inevitable, premature deaths. But the lost labor didn’t bother me so much as the whole hen-thing.

“They all look healthy,” she explained, “so I just grabbed what I could reach. How ‘bout these two?”

Perhaps they would live long and happy lives after all. We carried our two newest residents to the cash register, where our supplies waited. “Two broilers,” the man behind the checkout counter noted.

“Chickens,” I muttered.

“Sorry?”

“Chickens,” I enunciated, searching the man’s face for understanding. But I was pretty sure I could see bits of cow sinew and turkey flesh caught between his coffee-stained teeth. “They’re no more broilers than I’m a womb.” I looked from the tiny, round, black eyes to his large, almond-shaped, hazel eyes. His still-friendly gaze offered no understanding. I smiled, embarrassed to be different from his other customers—embarrassed to be different from what he was able to understand. I comforted myself: I could at least distinguish a chicken from dinner!

As my sister drove homeward I examined the tiny birds; they looked up at me with bright and wondering eyes. I also wondered. Where had they come from? Where was their mother? What of a mother who never saw her chicks, a mother born to endlessly lay eggs she never incubated? Was she already “spent,” unable to lay like a younger hen, and so sent off to slaughter, thrown about then finally thrown out—electrocuted motionless before her throat was slit by the hurried hands of her killer? Perhaps she had passed on through the gleaming opulence of Golden Arches, under the gaze of a cheerful clown, through human teeth to stomach, intestines, to finally be evacuated into still water?

And what had become of these little chicks’ brothers? How many roosters does one need to market a fat hen or undeveloped genetic material for a sunny-side up breakfast? I thought of my own unfertilized eggs, passed out each month, unmarketed, uneaten. Their brothers were dead, smothered in a great heap, eliminated in a garbage pile of little chicks that were superfluous to the industry. It doesn’t take many roosters, but it takes a lot of death and misery to provide chicken McNuggets and that sunny-side-up morning.

“Lois and Shirley?” I offered.

“Okay.”

We arrived home to the usual over-eager squeaks and yaps of dogs and a host of expectant feline eyes gazing from smudged windows in a tired mobile home. It didn’t look like much, but it served as home for many, and it was a well-planned home in at least one critical aspect—no breeding. Residents, including human animals—especially humans—were the last link in their own personal genetics.

I placed the little ones in a large cage in the chicken coop to protect them from other curious residents. Their mother could not be there to look after them, so I added a bit of hay for mother’s fluff, a light for mother’s warmth, water enough to drink but not drown, and baby food aplenty. Then I stood back to admire the rushing little yellow balls of softness. Exquisite.

Lois and Shirley sprang upward splendidly and explored the yard with exuberance. Rough feather-shafts thrust through baby-fluff, and half-formed wings propelled two young hens through gangly adolescence. Lois and Shirley dusted in the sun at the base of the barn, gobbled up spiders and moths in the corral, and roosted side by side in the hen house. They traveled in tandem, heads bobbing with each purposeful step, and they shared grubs under poppies and sunflowers in the rich earth of the garden.

“Broilers.” The word still irked me. How could anyone witness so many pairs of eager eyes set strategically on each side of busy beaks, with little yellow legs that had so many places to go, and see only a roasted carcass? In disgust, I imagined the cashier’s deadly diet delivering a coronary surprise, one that took him out of the marketplace altogether.

Lois and Shirley quickly reached full flower and were beautiful as summer daisies. Adult hen feathers gleamed white, and their frilly pink crowns were as perfect as tutus formed by the hand of Degas. But like an artist’s images, these beings were of human design, created to suit human tastes—literally. No sooner did they reach adulthood than their bodies began to grow like mushrooms in the rain; their lung capacity did not accommodate their body size. Joyous forays dwindled, then stopped altogether.

Before the warming sun shifted southward, Lois’ chest heaved and rattled with each laborious breath. The once rushing young bird lingered near the coop, pecking ants and spiders that wandered within reach of her smooth yellow beak. Shirley stayed with her ailing sister.

“She has a rattle in her lung,” my sister reported one hot afternoon, always prepared to speak what I was least likely to verbalize, and least inclined to want to hear. “The vet can never help our hens. What should we do?”

I pondered Lois, large for a hen but no taller than my rubber boot. I had no answer.

Evolution does not create “broilers,” they are born of capitalism and indifference to life. What was Lois to the industry that bred her bulky body but profit; what are chickens to most people but greasy, dismembered body parts or a thin slice of flesh between bread? The solution lies in what we choose for lunch.

“Let her alone,” I offered, feeling helpless and cowardly. Lois moved and breathed with effort. It was clear the young hen was suffering, but I could not bring myself to let her go.

Gleaming Lois lay cold and still in the early morning fog, and for the first time, Shirley stepped out of the hen house alone. “She’s all by herself,” my sister noted, as if on cue. Standing next to my sister, watching Lois move into a new day, I wondered which one of us would remain alone at the end of our time together.

It wasn’t but a few months before Shirley’s lungs began to sound like hiking boots on loose gravel. “She’s rattling,” my sister dutifully reported. Lines of worry played on the edges of her eyes like those of animated characters. I could see years of tender care overlaid with inevitable loss, and anxiety fostered by an indifferent world.

I scanned the hen’s graceful feathers, ruffled Degas crown, searching dark eyes. Shirley turned her head sideways and upward, returning my gaze. She was not inclined to want to move her bulky body, nor to strain her inadequate cardiovascular system. She was bred for consumption, not to have a life, and she had come to understand that sitting still was what she did best. “Let her alone,” I recommended with a familiar twinge of guilt. When the first rays of light came into the coop, Shirley’s beautiful yet imperfect body lay lifeless. I felt beaten. Hens can live upwards of 15 years, but the full and happy lives we planned for two busy spring chicks ended before the first frost. Had we made the right decisions? In spite of our hopes, were these hens condemned to live and die as “broilers”?

I knelt beside Shirley’s lifeless body. Lois and Shirley were “broilers,” yet when I looked into their eyes, they had looked back at me. I touched Shirley’s intricate feathers. They had died young, but Lois and Shirley had escaped the terrible life of “broilers.” They rushed through the fury of youth on strong legs, dined on random insects in green and growing grass, shared dust baths alongside the hen house, and rested in dazzling sunlight as their health failed. They lived their own lives. They had no price tag. And they were friends.

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